

Through Their Eyes: Identity Development in Transracial Adoption

Thesis

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Abstract

The number of Black children in the foster care system continues to grow at a disproportionate rate compared to other racial groups. Concurrently, transracial adoptions have grown steadily over the past several decades and make up of forty percent of adoptions in America. The adoption of Black children into White families faces significant vocal opposition, mainly due to the concern of identity development in a transracial family unit. Prior research has focused on the adoptive parents' perspective and interviews with young adoptees. This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by interviewing transracially adopted young adults. This study explored through the lens of the adoptee how the experience of transracial adoption shaped the adoptee's identity formation and how the adoptive parents supported him or her through that process. Two individuals, identifying as Biracial, participated in semi-structured interviews and one follow up phone call each. This study found the greatest source of support in identity development came from the participants' families; the participants cited love as being the most important supporting factor in their lives. The participants faced challenges fitting in throughout their childhood and adolescence but perceived those challenges as being closely related to navigating their Biracial identities rather than their transracial adoptions. This study outlines clear strategies for parents to aid their Biracial children in developing secure identities.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1: Statement of Research Topic

Statement of Problem

Transracial adoptions, both domestic and international, have steadily grown over the past several decades. Forty percent of the adoptions completed by American families are transracial (Baden et al, 2011). While the adoption of Black children into White families makes up the smallest subgroup of transracial adoptions, this group faces the most vocal opposition. This strong disapproval may be due to findings that claim race plays a critical role in the identity development of African American adoptees who are adopted transracially. The nature of identity development becomes increasingly important once an adoptee steps outside of the multiracial family unit and into the real world (Jacobson et al, 2012). African American transracial adoptees also report significantly more adjustment problems, including discomfort in appearance, in comparison to their Hispanic and Asian counterparts (Katz et al, 2013). The number of African American children present in the foster care system has grown at a disproportionate rate compared to other racial groups (Barn, 2013). Children of color are more likely to be removed from their parents and placed in foster care than White children. Additionally, non-White children tend to spend more time in the foster care system and are less likely to be reunified with their families or adopted (McRoy, 2004). These findings show the necessity in determining how a White family can successfully raise a Black child in terms of overall health and happiness.

Purpose of Study

Past research has focused primarily on interviews and surveys of adoptive parents and with adoptees while they were very young. Few researchers have sought to examine the experiences of mature adoptees in adulthood (Raible, 2008). Cross-sectional design studies implemented with adoptive parents can only focus on one point in time of a transracial adoptee's

life. They do not reveal any information concerning the adjustment of a child over time. Previously conducted surveys of parents are further limited by the reluctance of individuals to admit to parenting difficulties. Although longitudinal studies have potential to provide a greater understanding of transracial adoption, it is common for researchers to lose contact with families over time which leads to a loss of information (Park & Evans Green, 2000). This study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by interviewing individuals who have personally experienced a transracial adoption to offer their reflective perspectives on developing identity as part of a transracial adoptive family.

Research Aims

This study explored through the lens of the adoptee, how the experience of transracial adoption shaped the adoptee's identity formation and how the adoptive parents supported him or her through that process. One overarching research question served to guide the study:

How does the experience of transracial adoption shape an adoptee's identity formation and how do adoptive parents support him or her through that process?

This study sought to discover the strengths of the adoptive families and their support systems. The study pursued the idea that each individual carries a unique story and that researchers and practitioners must strive to understand individual experiences with transracial adoption. Results from this study will serve as a tool for professionals to aide them in the decision making process of transracial placements and to educate and support families beginning the process of or in the midst of transracial adoptions. As discussed, the subject of transracial adoption is relevant to society and the social work profession as it is highly debated but may be necessary to place all of the children waiting for families.

Description of Study Approach

This study used a qualitative approach in interviewing transracial adoptees in order to give the adoptees space to describe their experience. In seeking to fill a gap in the literature, interviews were conducted with individuals who have personally experienced a transracial adoption. The study focused on recruiting Black individuals between the ages of 18-24 years old who were adopted into White homes as children. Recruitment did not exclude individuals who identified as Biracial in mixed-race families.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

History of Transracial Adoption (TRA)

Transracial adoption, or TRA, has long been a topic fiercely debated in society, specifically in the realm of social work. TRA is defined as any adoption that involves placing a child in a family that is racially and culturally different from that child. International and domestic TRA both arose in the 1950s and 1960s with the adoption of Korean and Japanese children orphaned by the war and the placement of Native American children in White families followed by African American children. The practice of domestic TRA was received with strong opposition from the African American and Native American communities. The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 sought to maintain Native American family life by granting tribes sole jurisdiction in child welfare and the adoption of children (Barn 2013). The National Association of Black Social workers was the main group opposing transracial placements, fighting to preserve the Black identity they perceived as being lost through TRA (Jacobson et al, 2012). Their vocal opposition is thought to have led to a reduction in TRAs, though no formal legislation was passed to prevent them. Despite the debate over the implications of TRA that continued throughout the 80s and 90s, the government continued to pass legislation to support such placements.

The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) was passed in 1994, preventing agencies from refusing to place children, excluding Native American children, in families solely based on racial/ethnic background (Barn, 2013). MEPA was developed as a result of concern that race-matching policies were acting as a barrier to the placement of African American children, resulting in overrepresentation in the child welfare system (McRoy & Griffin, 2012). MEPA also requires state agencies to make diligent efforts to recruit and retain adoptive and foster parents

who represent the racial/ethnic background of children in foster care (Evan B Donaldson Institute, 2008). Two years later, an amendment, the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP), was passed which put funding at risk for agencies who emphasized race in placement decisions, eliminating the consideration of race altogether (Barn, 2013). Although the purpose behind MEPA-IEP was to remove the barriers to transracial adoption, it has failed to reduce the overrepresentation of African American children in the foster care system or the time African American children spend in foster care (McRoy & Griffin, 2012).

Debate

As transracial adoptions have become more common, the debate over the ramifications of placing a child in a family with a differing ethnic/racial background has become ever more relevant. There seem to be an equal number of those in support and in opposition, each with research to back up their claims. Many are concerned that White families lack the ability to properly raise and socialize children of different ethnic, cultural or racial backgrounds (Jacobson et al, 2012). Studies also have shown negative outcomes in terms of identity, belonging and culture as a result of transracial adoptions (Barn, 2013). Other researchers clearly see the value in placing children of one race with parents of another race or culture (Raible, 2008). Supporters of transracial adoption argue that it is much better to place children with a family of a different race than to allow them to linger in the foster care system (Butler-Sweet, 2011). With strong evidence based research to both criticize and praise the practice of TRA, it can be extremely overwhelming and stressful for social workers to decide how to place children. Social workers strive to make the best possible choice in the interest of a child but the conflicting information available to professionals makes it difficult to do so with a clear conscience.

Challenges for Adoptive Parents

According to Barn (2013), proponents and adversaries of TRA are in agreement that if an appropriate family within the race of the child can be found, the child should be placed in that family. Barn states that TRA should be a last resort and used only when adoptive parents strive to acquire the knowledge and tools to help children develop a positive racial/ethnic identity and show their children how to navigate through a society obsessed with race. Fortunately or unfortunately, it is not always possible for a child to be placed within a family who shares the same racial/ethnic background. Additionally, social workers cannot legally place children based on race alone (Jacobson et al, 2012). As transracial adoptions continue to grow in number, professionals involved in the research and adoption processes must find ways to best prepare families to adopt transracially and to provide them with supports in the community.

The concern of parents and families not being fully prepared to adopt transracially is a valid one. Researchers have found that many families pursuing or completing a transracial adoption were very naïve in taking on the enormous responsibility of raising transracially adopted children with few social supports in place (Raible, 2008). There is a strong need for TRA parents to acquire the ability to meet challenges related to raising children of color with positive racial identities. Only half of the agencies in the United States that currently facilitate transracial adoptions provide cultural competency training for parents going through an adoption. Of those agencies, very few public and only a third of private agencies provide post-placement training and follow-up (Vonk & Angaran, 2003).

Societal Response to TRA

While lack of proper preparation can negatively affect the success of a transracial adoption, community and social supports make up a crucial part in adjustment as well.

According to a 2013 study on the negative responses to transracial adoptive families (Katz & Doyle), racist attitudes and dissimilar parent-child appearance can affect attitudes toward transracial adoption. Racism has evolved over the years from outright and confrontational to a more modern form. Modern racists do not perceive the benefits of White privilege or the specific challenges faced by minority groups. Additionally, people are uncomfortable seeing parents and children together who do not have shared appearance. Visible racial differences violate expectations based on traditional birth families as shared similar features tend to validate family bonds. The attitudes of modern racists combined with the need people feel to be able to identify families based on shared similar appearances makes it hard for transracial families to adjust and feel welcomed and accepted. The study by Katz and Doyle (2013) found that the devaluation of Black children, in general and as children who are adopted, may discourage White families from adopting Black children. The devaluation of transracial families, particularly families who are mixed Black and White, promotes discriminatory treatment and may discourage couples from adopting children in need while also interfering with child adjustment.

Support for Adoptive Families

Preparing families with skills to raise their transracially adopted children to become healthy and happy adults needs to become a priority in the adoption and foster care realm, but even that is pointless unless communities shift to become more open minded and supportive. Society has not yet figured out how to adequately support transracial adoptive families nor integrate the social networks and institutions. The public as a whole has also failed to prepare and support the courageous families who have taken on the complexities of race and adoption in their own lives (Raible, 2008). Results from Katz and Doyle's study (2013) show that adoption workers should thoroughly educate and prepare prospective adoptive families regarding the

negative responses they may receive from society regarding their decision to adopt transracially. They found that post placement, families would really benefit from strong support to help combat the added stress due to observer reactions. Their study calls for an educational approach in combination with exposure to TRA families to reduce the negative feelings toward TRA.

With the proper support system and education, transracial adoptions can be very beneficial for all involved and serve as an incredible opportunity to overcome the challenges of race in today's society. One researcher, Rita J. Simon, spent over twenty years interviewing families who had experienced a transracial adoption. Looking back over her data, she came to several conclusions. Simon (1996) wrote that transracial adoption appeared to give children the opportunity to develop an awareness of race and a respect for different physical characteristics. She noted that many parents intentionally engaged their families in activities that would enhance racial awareness and identity. If the time came that the parents drew back from these activities, it usually was at the request of the adoptees. Simon had the children of the families she studied engage in both a self-esteem assessment and a family integration skill test. She compared the results of Black TRAs, other TRAs, White birth children and White adoptees and found no significant differences in scores across these groups despite originally hypothesizing that the adopted children would both feel less integrated into their families and have a lower self-esteem than non-adopted children (Simon, 1996). Simon was able to study the same families for over a decade and identify some of the long term, positive effects that TRA can have on the identity of adoptees, such as self-confidence and security. Simon noted the tools that families used to help their children grow up to be healthy and feel loved, including conversations around the dinner table regarding race and living in diverse neighborhoods.

Biracial Identity Development

The process of identity development is complex for many individuals. The experience of Biracial individuals is even more complicated as this population tends to struggle the most with the identity construction process (Butler-Sweet, 2011b). Many Biracial individuals struggle with feeling like they have to choose between their two racial identities and often feel isolated in that process. However, racial identity is considered important in how it relates to one's view of self, others in one's racial groups and those in other racial groups (Poston, 1990).

Most previous models of Biracial identity development fail to recognize the possibility of individuals choosing to embrace and identify with more than one ethnic identity. Dissatisfied with the limitations of past theorists, Poston (1990) developed a model to more accurately describe the five complex stages of identity construction Biracial individuals experience (see Table 1).

Table 1
<i>Stages of Biracial Identity Development</i>
Personal Identity
Choice of Group Categorization
Enmeshment/Denial
Appreciation
Integration

In the first stage, Personal Identity, individuals are typically very young and belonging to a particular ethnic group is just being explored. Rather, identity is based on self-esteem and feelings of self-worth that are experienced within a family. The next stage, Choice of Group Categorization, finds individuals pushed to choose an identity, normally of just one ethnic group,

in order to belong to a certain peer or family group. It is rare for an individual at this stage to choose a multiethnic identity as this requires a certain level of knowledge and development surrounding cultures that requires a higher cognitive level than is typical for this age group.

Poston (1990) labeled the third stage of his model Enmeshment/Denial. This time period sees individuals experiencing confusion and guilt over making a choice that does not fully express or embrace one's background. Boundaries within the family unit may become unclear during this time which may stunt individual growth. Individuals also may feel guilt and lack of acceptance from one or more ethnic groups and may feel guilt over rejecting the heritage of one parent. Adolescents in this stage either have to work through and resolve anger and learn to appreciate both parent's racial backgrounds or remain at this level. The next stage, Appreciation, occurs when individuals begin to value their multiple identities and expand their reference group orientation. Individuals still tend to identify more with one group over another but seek to learn about their ethnic/racial heritage and cultures. In the final stage, Integration, individuals experience wholeness through recognizing and valuing all of their ethnic identities.

To assist in this complex process of identity development, McRoy and Freeman (1986) identified five strategies for parents to use to support their children (see Figure 2). These strategies are designed to help develop positive racial identities. Encouraging children to acknowledge and discuss racial heritage with parents and other individuals, and parents acknowledging their child's racial/ethnic background as different than their own are both crucial to developing a positive racial identity. Another strategy suggests giving children opportunities to develop relationships with peers from many different backgrounds, such as living in diverse areas with diverse schools. McRoy and Freeman (1986) encourage allowing children to meet role

models that look like them. Finally, forming a family identity as an interracial unit can help children through their process of identity construction.

Table 2
<i>Strategies for Developing a Healthy Racial Identity</i>
Encourage children to acknowledge and discuss racial heritage
Parents acknowledge children's differing racial/ethnic background as a positive
Providing opportunities for children to develop relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds
Allow children to meet role models through activities held by support groups
Forming as a family an identity as an interracial unit

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically one of phenomenology. It serves to describe the phenomenon of identity development within a transracial adoption setting. The study used semi-structured interviews to explore the adoptees' process of identity formation and the essence of their experience. The researchers received approval for the study by the Institutional Review Board of the Ohio State University.

Recruitment

The co-investigator posted fliers describing the study around the researcher's University campus three times over the course of eight months. The co-investigator contacted and supplied hard copies of fliers to two adoption organizations in the Cincinnati area that agreed to have the fliers available at support group meetings. Contact was made with five other organizations involving adoption and foster care services around the Cincinnati and Columbus area and fliers were distributed digitally to them. Of those five organizations, three responded that they would pass along fliers to those in their support groups or posted the flier on their organization's Facebook page. A sixth organization was contacted via phone. The co-investigator left a voicemail but did not hear back from that organization. Additionally, the co-investigator contacted two individuals in the adoption field in the Cincinnati area and was able to provide one of them with fliers. The flier provided held contact information for the co-investigator.

Sample

The study sample aimed to consist of 5-8 individuals who identify as Black and were adopted domestically into White households as children. The individuals being studied were transitional age young adults, between 18 and 24 years of age. The sample was limited to

individuals who were adopted within the state of Ohio. Criterion sampling was used in order to ensure the sample is consistent and representative of the desired sample population.

The sample consisted of two participants, both 21 years of age, one male and one female. Both participants identified as being Biracial, mixed Black and White. One of the participants was adopted into a home with two White parents, White siblings, and Black siblings. The second participant was adopted into a home with one White parent, one Black parent, and one Biracial sibling. Both sets of adoptive parents had fathers with either a bachelor or master's level of education and mothers with some college education. Both participants were adopted as infants.

Data Collection Procedures

Two participants reached out to the co-investigator, one saw the recruitment flier on the researcher's University and the other heard about the study by word of mouth.

Once contact was made, the researcher set up a phone conversation to go over the study details, including making sure the participant met the criteria for the study. The interviewee chose a place to meet and a time. The interviewees first filled out a form asking for demographic information followed by a one-on-one interview either in person, via telephone or via Skype. One interview was audiorecorded and one interview was videorecorded.

The researcher obtained consent from the interviewee and provided him or her with a copy of the consent form to keep. The researcher then reviewed the purpose of the study with the participant, the amount of time anticipated for the interview, and how the results of the study will be used. The researcher asked the interviewee to fill out a provided demographic form.

The researcher began the interview by discussing the demographic questions with the participant before asking the main interview questions. Probing questions were used to solicit more information as needed from the participant. The interview consisted of a series of questions

related to the participant's process of identity formation. After the interview, the researcher provided each interviewee with a contact card for several counseling services in the area. The co-investigator conducted one follow-up contact with participants to obtain clarifying information as needed.

The interviews and follow-calls were either audio or video recorded and transcribed to assist in the data analysis. A number was assigned to each interviewee and all individual identifiers were stripped from the audiotape/videotape and transcription. A key code linking the interviewee's number and name was stored separately from the audiotape and transcriptions.

Measures

The interview questions were developed based on the lack of information available in the literature on the personal experience of transracial adoption, as told by the adoptees themselves. The interview began with the participant providing some background demographic information (see Appendix 1). The demographic sheet asked participants to identify their race, age and gender. The sheet had space for individuals to share the city they grew up in, their current city of residence, age at adoption and their highest level of education. There was also a question about the highest level of education for both adoptive parents, if applicable. The researcher then discussed aspects of the demographic sheet with the participant.

The semi-structured interview immediately followed discussion of the demographic information. The interview consisted of seven main questions which were open-ended in order to let participants express their experiences freely. Four of the questions included two specific follow-up or probing questions that the researcher could ask to help participants expand on an idea. The questions follow a strengths based perspective and focus on identity formation in the context of a transracial adoption (see Table 3).

Table 3

Interview Measures

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Probing Questions</u>
1. Tell me about your identity.	<p>a) This can include race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc.</p> <p>b) Primary, secondary, most important to you</p>
2. What kinds of things did your parents do to support the formation of your identity?	<p>a) How did your parents respond to any questions or curiosities you might have had?</p> <p>b) How racially diverse was the neighborhood in which you grew up?</p>
3. Describe your experience of finding a place of belonging growing up.	<p>a) In what ways were you supported in finding where you belong?</p> <p>b) What obstacles may have prevented you from or make it more difficult to find a place of belonging?</p>
4. Who are the other people in your life, if any, that impacted the development of your identity growing up?	
5. Have you ever sought to learn more about your racial background?	<p>a) If yes, Did that occur while you were growing up, after you had moved away from home, or a combination of the two?</p> <p>b) If no, Are there an particular reasons you did not?</p>

6. What do you feel that your adoptive parents or your supporting community could have done to enhance your identity development?

7. What else would be important for you to tell others about your experience?

After the transcription and analysis of the initial interviews, the researcher determined additional information would be necessary to accurately portray the participant's experiences. One phone call with each participant served as a follow-up to clarify information and expand on the answers the participants had provided. The content of those questions built directly off of the information provided in the initial interviews.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed each of the audio/video recordings and completed an inductive thematic analysis (Padgett, 2008) of the transcriptions for each interviewee with the goal of accurately capturing the experience of identity development of each participant. The first round of analysis included "open coding and memoing" (Padgett, 1998) to identify initial ideas and themes in the transcripts, one question at a time. Subsequent rounds of analysis used an iterative method to analyze the interview content of each participant to ensure that the codes and themes discovered were a true representation of the participants' stories. After these rounds of coding, the researcher identified several emerging themes and placed them into categories.

The follow-up interviews were then transcribed and coded in a similar manner. The researcher then refined the original codes in order to identify overall themes for each interview. The themes from each interviewee's experience were used to create a diagram categorizing the

themes and illustrating how they relate to identity formation. A deductive content analysis (Franklin, 1996) was performed to align Biracial identity theory and supportive factors to Biracial identity development with the findings from the interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings

Supports for Biracial Identity Development

The participants expressed a variety of ways in which they were supported growing up in the process of identity formation (see Appendix B). From specific ways the participants' families offered support to community interactions, the participants in this study disclosed the journey they took to becoming secure in their identities.

Both participants identified their parents as their greatest source of support. Openness, honesty, and communication were among the traits the participants stressed as being the most significant in their relationships and interactions with their parents.

They were always very open with our, like, birth families and that kind of thing and I guess they always, like, fielded questions in a very open manner. Like, they always would answer our questions very honestly. (P1)

If I ever had any questions, they would answer them, do anything they could ... they were always very open, you know, willing to talk about it if I ever had anything come up. (P2)

Both participants identified conversations with their parents involving race and prejudice as being significant to their identity development. They highlighted their parents' awareness of the challenges that Black individuals face in society.

My dad especially is very aware of, like, the issues, that especially my [Black] brothers face, he talks about it on a pretty regular basis. He sees a lot of, like, the bias people have towards them ... and the way that people treat them differently and he will, like, call attention to it. (P1)

There were things that were kind of instilled in me from my mom, you know, parts of town you don't want to go to ... you gotta watch how you act in front of certain people, whenever you're dealing with the police, just be polite, you know, always do what they say. (P2)

One participant mentioned the reassurance and encouragement her parents provided during times of doubt and uncertainty. She struggled to fit in with both Black and White peers and felt stuck in between the two groups.

I think my parents were the most supportive because they made me feel like I definitely had a place. Cause there were times when I would, like, question ... is there a place for me? They would always be very, like, reassuring and like yes, there is a place for you, you just have to take your time to find it. (P1)

In addition to their parent's aid in navigating identity development, the participants spoke of the comfort found amongst their siblings. At times, the participants found it helpful to have someone experiencing similar challenges and navigating those difficulties together.

My siblings and I had to find our way through it together because a lot of the time we didn't have like anyone else so that was helpful to have them. (P1)

Aside from significant familial support, the participants in this study identified different aspects of their communities, both past and present, as helpful in their identity development. One participant shared at length about his family's experience with an extremely involved social worker, both during and after his adoption. The social worker followed up extensively with the family, even on her own personal time, to make sure that everything was going well.

She was just super understanding with both parties, really made the whole adoption go smoothly... on her own time she was just very involved and dedicated to the whole adoption. (P2)

One participant was very involved in church growing up and indicated role models he interacted with in church impacted his identity formation. He spoke of certain people looking out for him and having an influence on the person he is today.

I had some role models, some mentors, key people I always kind of looked up to. And they, you know, they were really compassionate, caring, you know, and growing up it was like, I wanted to be like this person ... that's something that, even now, I'm grateful for. (P2)

For one of the participants, community support was not discovered or truly felt until later in life, once she had gone away to college. At college, she was able to branch out and meet new people, ones that looked like her and with whom she could more easily identify. She was also able to join groups that focus on diversity and take part in activities that helped her identity development. She shared the role conversations and discussions have had on her identity.

I've talked to, like, friends and other people who identify as mixed race, so that's been like really helpful. (P1)

Going to college and experiencing so much more diversity made me much more comfortable with my identity ... There was a minority program that I went to at (another college) and then I'm part of a racial awareness program at (participant's college) now. (P1)

Hindrances to Biracial Identity Development

The participants in this study were quick to share the positive aspects of their processes of identity formation growing up in a transracial family. It took a little more prodding to gain insight into the challenges and struggles they faced throughout childhood and adolescence. Both participants grew up in geographically White areas and attended schools with predominantly White peers.

All through school I went to a predominantly White school, um, so I didn't really have any interaction with what someone would have thought as, you know, a typical Black family, you know a Black environment, anything like that. (P2)

While one participant was able to connect with White peers fairly easily, the other participant struggled. This participant's family moved during her childhood, trying to live in an area with better schools.

But then, when I was in sixth grade, we moved to [an area] which is not very diverse at all. So, I went from an area with like a great deal of diversity to not much diversity at all. So that was definitely hard for all of us. (P1)

It was difficult for the participant to fit in among her new peer group and to relate to the things her friends were going through.

... it was like a much harder time [finding a place of belonging]. Especially cause like we're not White so, and the majority of people were White so, it was kind of a struggle. I ended up ... being friends with mostly White people, partially because the sports that I played were dominated by White people... But like, on a lot of things, we had very different experiences so I think it made it hard to relate sometimes. (P1)

Some of those experiences relate to the teasing she faced in her school. People made comments about the different races of her family members. Her peers had certain expectations about how she would act and when she did not meet those preconceived notions, she was teased. The problems fitting in were not only among White peers; the few Black students at her school did not accept her in their group either.

In my school, because there were so few Black people in my school, like most of the Black people hung out and I wasn't Black enough for a lot of them so that was hard. (P1)

Later, this participant's parents recognized the challenges their children faced growing up in a community that lacked diversity. They expressed regret at not providing their children with peers with whom they could easily identify.

I don't know if they picked up on everything right away but there have definitely been conversations where I like talk to my parents and they say things like we should have never moved, like you would've been much better off if we had stayed in like a diverse area. (P1)

This participant also identified the challenge of not being able to relate well to her White or Black siblings as she did not fully fit in with either group. Her process of identity development was different from the processes her Black and White siblings experienced; she was trying to navigate two different racial identities. She did not feel as though she could talk to them about what she was going through as she believed they would not understand.

So like no one has really shared my experience so like that's been kind of hard, um, because like that issues that I deal with are different from the issues that like my Black siblings like deal with. (P1)

In retrospect, this participant desired more from those surrounding her and her family.

As far as the community, I guess it just would've been nice if like people were more open to the idea of acceptance and that kind of thing. (P1)

There were and are a lot of times when like people like don't believe that like my parents are my parents or that my parents are my siblings' parents, or something like that. (P1)

The second participant, who was adopted into a home with one White parent and one Black parent, described a different experience with hindrances to identity development than the participant adopted into a home with two White parents. This participant was able to “pass” as being White and therefore did not describe experience with much pushback from others about his identity.

People today come up to me all of the time and tell me, oh I can tell you're your dad's son, and we all kind of laugh because we know, but people say I look exactly like my dad and I don't so, I don't know what they're looking at. (P2)

Here I am, I don't look mixed at all, so it, it's never really been a thing. (P2)

While this participant viewed in a positive way that he was able to easily fit into his White peer group and family, it is significant in that he did not appear to embrace both parts of his identity. His ability to “pass” as a White individual served as a challenge to him fully embracing his multiethnic identity, which he appeared to not recognize. In contrast to the experience described by the other participant, this participant experienced community support and acceptance very early on.

Transracial Adoption

Both participants displayed a deep understanding of the negative associations that adoption carries for some people. One participant heard of others' experiences within the foster care system that were less than ideal and was aware of the effects those stories have on others.

Now I know that there is a lot of negative connotations, especially with foster children, um, with the whole idea that they're never treated right, they're just in it for the money. (P2)

They [people] feel like adoption is a terrible thing, like you know, one of these last ditch efforts. (P2)

In contrast, the participants described their personal experience with adoption as being overall extremely positive. They identified challenges and struggles along the way, relating to adoption in general and transracial adoption specifically, but recognize the love and support they gained when they were adopted.

I think that people tend to shy away from adopting transracially and I've always been of the opinion that adoption is something that like, you shouldn't adopt on the basis of color, or race, or whatever. Like, I think that it's important to remember like we're all people, like yes, we have different experiences and like our lives will be different but like I think that the basis of adoption is always love and I think that like, can get through a lot of things. (P1)

My idea of adoption is, it's a great thing, um, you, you can make a family happy. (P2)

My parents that I have now, they're awesome, they're great. And I, being older and looking back, there's no way I would change anything of it. (P2)

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to explore how the experience of transracial adoption impacts identity development, specifically when Black children are adopted into White families. This study also sought to discover the ways parents can support their children through the process of identity construction. Unexpectedly, two Biracial individuals were the only people to respond to this study. Although the research questions shifted as a result of the sample, the theme of identity formation within the context of a transracial adoption remained. The Biracial individuals in this study present as well-adjusted in their young adult lives and credit their success in identity development to their support systems, mainly their parents.

The two participants seemed to connect the challenges and struggles they experienced with identity development more to their Biracial identities than to the fact that they were adopted. Their experiences consistently aligned with the literature available on Biracial identity development. Feelings of not fitting in and struggles to identify with peers are completely normal for Biracial individuals to experience during adolescence (Poston, 1990). They had periods of feeling disconnected from their peers and family members that did not share their Biracial identity but were able to reach a point where they now appear to embrace and appreciate their multiethnic backgrounds and seek out opportunities to share about their experience.

While the participants in this study were eager to share the strengths of their families, they were willing to acknowledge additional ways in which their parents could have better supported them. Both participants mentioned the White geographic areas in which they grew up and recognized that more diversity would have offered a positive influence on their identities. One participant stressed the challenge of not having peers who looked like her or shared similar experiences growing up. She noted that having people with whom to discuss her specific

experiences of growing up Biracial might have helped her become “more comfortable” (P1) in her Biracial identity. These findings are consistent with the literature (McRoy & Freeman 1986) and may serve as a tool for future families deciding to adopt transracially or who are raising Biracial children.

While both participants established many characteristics of their parents and other significant individuals in their lives, the most important part of their experience was “love”. The love and support they felt from their families ultimately aided them in overcoming identity challenges. Both participants stressed how grateful they are for their parents and the ways they loved and nurtured them. One participant spoke of how love allowed her to overcome difficulties and that she believes it has the power to “get [people] through a lot of things”. It was the participants’ opinion that it is possible to raise transracially individuals to have healthy identities, with the right attitudes and support systems, but most importantly, with love.

Both participants are in the transitional age of their lives. They still have ways in which they will grow and develop as individuals. The participants identified most of their struggles to be separate from their transracial adoption experience; they were transracially adopted but that is not what they identified as challenges to fitting in, identifying with peers, etc. It is possible that later in life they may recognize that the experience of a transracial adoption had more of an impact on their identity and lives than they realized as young adults. Their experience with transracial adoption might also have had a different influence on them than they recognized. Specifically, the second participant, with one Black parent and one White parent, expressed not having much trouble finding his place of belonging, within his family or at school. It is possible that later in life he might recognize the advantage of being able to ‘pass’ as his father’s son in terms of developing his racial identity.

Biracial Identity Theory Comparison

The two participants in this study journeyed through several different stages in the process of their identity development as Biracial individuals. The stages of development line up very closely to the stages Poston (1990) outlined in his Biracial Identity Development Model.

Personal Identity

One participant describes the changes she noticed in the way she thought about herself in terms of her racial identity. In accordance with the literature, she did not identify herself by her race as a young child.

When I was younger I didn't really identify as anything really, um, but then as I got older and like I now self identify as Black and White. (P1)

Choice of Group Categorization

Both participants spent most of their childhood alongside White peers, in predominantly White school systems. As the participants did not have much exposure to Black or mixed race peers, it is understandable that they spent the majority of their time with White peers and may have identified with them. While they may not have consciously chosen to identify with White individuals, their experience aligns with the Choice of Group Categorization.

I ended up ... being friends with mostly White people, partially because the sports that I played were dominated by White people. Like, I did water polo and swimming so those weren't really diverse sports at least at my school. And then, all the friends, most of the friends that I had outside of those sports were White as well. (P1)

Enmeshment/Denial

One participant had a difficult time with Poston's stage of Enmeshment/Denial, expressing feelings of not being able to fit in or find a place. She felt as though she were trapped between the White and Black cultures and could not blend into either.

I always felt out of place I guess cause like, there was always like a clear divide like, in just race. And I was always kind of stuck in the middle. (P1)

Appreciation

After conversations with other Biracial individuals and experiencing more of life, the first participant was able to move into the Appreciation stage. Though the second participant did not explicitly acknowledge the motivation behind seeking more diverse friendships, he discussed his desire for expanding his circle of friends and how naturally it came to him

I guess like seeing, like, as my understanding of the way the world worked and the way that certain people are treated in the world and how people are treated differently, that helped inform my, the formation of my identity I guess ... I've talked to like friends and other people um who identify as mixed race, so that's been like really helpful. (P1)

I really tried to integrate myself a lot into it [Black culture], and seeing it would also apply, at school suddenly I had a lot more Black friends, we'd go out, I'd go over, you know, to their house, it was, I just kind of assimilated into it really well, um, and no one ever really thought anything of it. (P2)

Integration

Poston's final stage of Integration can be seen through the way both participants now embrace their Biracial identities. Both participants self-identified at the beginning of the study as either Mixed race or Biracial and indicated that these were parts of their primary identities.

Okay, so I guess my primary identity would be like, female, I guess. And then after that it would be race, so mixed. (P1)

Okay, um, as far as my identity, I would definitely say I am biracial, mixed Black and White. (P2)

The way that each participant chose to identify himself or herself from early childhood to late adolescence shifted as they experienced the world, pursued diverse friendships and discussed their identities with others. Both individuals appear to embrace their Biracial identities at this point in time and seem to be content in those identities.

Supports to Identity Development

Both participants identified several ways their parents supported their identity construction that aligned with McRoy and Freeman's (1986) strategies for developing a healthy Biracial identity (see Appendix 3).

As discussed earlier in the Findings section, both sets of adoptive parents were very open in discussing race and racial differences with their children and often initiated the conversations themselves. McRoy and Freeman (1986) stressed the importance of acknowledging a child's Biracial identity as a positive aspect of his or her identity. The first participant's parents embraced her identity and helped her to do the same, even in moments of doubt.

So that was always kind of confusing for me [being stuck in the middle] but like they made it very clear that I didn't have to pick, I was free to be who I wanted to be. And that like I didn't have to let my race define me, if that makes sense. (P1)

Not all support can be provided solely by an individual's family, the environment and community in which an individual grows up also impacts their identity development. While both participants were surrounded by predominantly White peers in their early childhoods, the second

participant was able to have a more diverse peer group by the time he was in middle school. He was also able to meet role models through the church he attended as a child. Though the majority of the people attending this church were White, the participant was still able to identify with them and acknowledged the impact they have had on his life to this day.

I had some role models, some mentors, key people I always kind of looked up to. (P2)

The final strategy McRoy and Freeman endorse involves a family taking on the identity of an interracial unit. While both participants' families were made up of various races, only the second participant shared of his family accomplishing this goal.

... it was definitely nice having mixed parents, it gave me more of a culture. I've definitely seen the best of both worlds. (P2)

Study Challenges

The most significant challenge in conducting this study involved recruitment. Despite the efforts previously detailed, the researcher was contacted by only two individuals. One of the individuals saw a flier in the University's Student Union and the other heard about the study by word of mouth. There may be a number of reasons the researchers struggled to meet recruitment goals. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, identity development, within the context of a highly debated practice, transracial adoption, individuals meeting the research criteria may have felt uncomfortable reaching out to share their stories.

As previously stated, this study sought to interview individuals between the ages of 18-24. Several organizations that the researcher contacted shared the involvement in their organizations or groups of individuals under 18 years of age but not within the intended age groups. It is possible that adoptees are not as involved in support groups or other communities relating to their adoptions once they have reached adulthood and presumably moved out of their

adoptive families' home. Neither participant from the study participated in any support groups growing up or currently. If adoptees in this age range are not involved in support groups, connected to other adoptees who are in support groups, or attending the University of the researchers, they likely would not have been exposed to this study.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study can shape the way professionals interact with and support families pursuing transracial adoptions. This study should serve as encouragement for families adopting transracially, especially when Biracial children are involved. Despite the literature detailing negative ramifications of transracial adoptions, particularly in regards to identity development (Barn, 2013, Jacobson et al, 2012), this study shows that Biracial children can be raised to be secure in their identities.

This study should also encourage professionals who may still be wary of transracial placements and help waiting children to be placed in families. The findings outline, through first-hand experiences, clear strategies for developing healthy Biracial identities and ways that families can support their children throughout that process. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and its amendment, Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP), were passed over 20 years ago. The passage of these laws have done little to correct the overrepresentation of African American and Black children in the foster care system (McRoy & Griffin, 2012). With this knowledge gained through this study, professionals should be able to ease concerns of families who may be wary of adopting transracially. Professionals can additionally provide adopting families with skills for successful transitions.

Implications for Future Research and Policy

This study was exploratory and sought to serve as a tool for professionals by providing them specific strategies to implement with families. These strategies outlined above carry merit through the real-life accounts from which they were derived.

Findings from this study provide an avenue for further research. This study explored the unique experiences of two Biracial individuals who experienced transracial adoption. This study showed the specific challenges Biracial individuals may face in the context of transracial adoptions and ways to overcome those challenges. It seems to be possible for Biracial individuals to enter adulthood with a positive racial identity regardless of the races of their parents, or of those raising them. Due to the small sample size, further research into the experience of Biracial individuals adopted into transracial homes should be done to confirm these findings.

Researchers may also want to replicate this study to seek insight into the original research objectives around the intended population group, Black or African American individuals. This study could be further replicated across a variety of races and ethnicities to determine how applicable the findings of this study are to transracial adoptions in general.

The findings of this study may serve to shape future policies surrounding transracial adoptions, specifically in regards to Biracial individuals. This is a population that does not received the same attention and may not have been initially in mind when creating policies such as MEPA and IEP. Future policy should take into account the unique experiences of Biracial individuals in terms of identity development and how to best prepare professionals and families to serve these individuals in the most effective and ethical way.

Conclusion

This study originally sought to examine the experience of Black transracially adopted individuals yet ended up exploring Biracial identity development within the context of a transracial adoption. The first-hand accounts of transracial adoption revealed the families of the participants as the biggest source of support in the process of identity formation. The participants perceived their challenges in identity development as being more closely related to their Biracial identities than their experience of being transracially adopted. The participants held a positive view of adoption, regardless of race, and cite love as being the most important factor in overcoming challenges. This study serves as a resource for professionals and adoptive families alike in illustrating the possibility for healthy identities to emerge from transracial adoptive families.

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Appendix A: Demographic Form

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Race:

City of current residence:

City of residence during childhood:

Age at adoption:

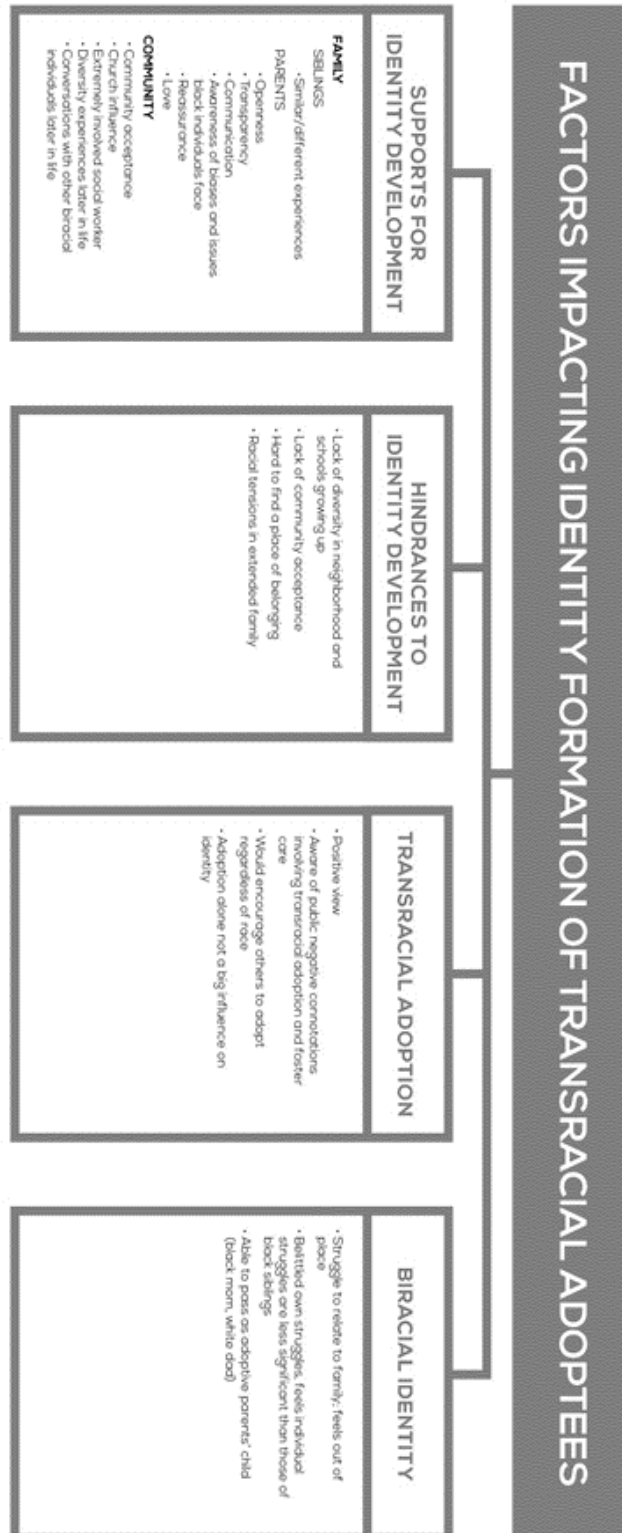
Highest level of education:

Highest level of adoptive parent's education:

Parent 1:

Parent 2:

Appendix B: Interview Results



Appendix C: Racial Identity Development Comparison

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A HEALTHY BIRACIAL IDENTITY		
MCROY & FREEMAN'S STRATEGY	P1'S EXPERIENCE	P2'S EXPERIENCE
Encourage children to acknowledge and discuss racial heritage	"My dad especially is aware of the the issues, he talks about it on a pretty regular basis. He says a lot of like, 'the boss.'"	"There were things that were always kind of instilled in me from my mom, parts of town you don't want to go to, you gotta watch how you act in front of certain people."
Parents acknowledge child's offering racial/ethnic background as a positive	"...they made it very clear to me that I didn't have to pick (Black or White identity). I was free to be who I wanted to be."	
Providing child opportunities to develop relationships with peers from many backgrounds		"I really tried to integrate myself into it, suddenly I had a lot more Black friends."
Allow child to meet role models through social activities held by support groups	"...going to college and experiencing so much more diversity made me much more comfortable with my identity."	"...growing up in church I had some role models, some mentors, key people I always kind of looked up to."
Forming as a family unit on identity as an interracial unit		"...it was definitely nice having mixed parents, it gave me more of a culture, I've definitely seen the best of both worlds."